

March 1, 1959

Mr. Eugene Kinkead
The New Yorker
25 West 43 Street
New York 36, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Kinkead:

Your letter of the 24th has just arrived here, having been forwarded from Wisconsin.

It is neither surprising nor disagreeable that the New Yorker and yourself should pick up an interest in planetary biology and the Cetex problem, and one could hardly hope for a better vehicle by which to inform the educated public. Frankly, my main concern is that policies are being made right now by discussions in scientific and administrative circles, that my own views are perhaps as vehement as are being advanced now, and that the New Yorker might be misconstrued as an inept vehicle for pressing these views on my scientific colleagues. On the other hand, the question of "life on other worlds" is probably the weightiest scientific issue in space research, and certainly the one in which the general public is most likely to be concerned. The social investment in our missile program is tremendous and the public should be informed. You should be sure, however, to distinguish authoritative from private opinions. I would prefer to reach my scientific colleagues through customary channels and not prejudice the sober appraisal of my own opinions by having them prematurely colored by too easy misconstructions and lurid journalism, as I am afraid may well happen in other sections of the press than your own.

You have my full approval to use any material that Drs. Bronk, Porter or Berkner feels is ready for release at this time (the story begins December 1957 by the way) or, it goes ~~was~~ without saying, anything that has been published. A number of technical reports are being prepared here and in the east: I suggest you consult Dr. Bruno Rossi at MIT, Hugh Odishaw at NAS in Washington and Robert Jastrow at NASA for any of this. Donald Hughes at Brookhaven (Upton, L.I.) will have gone to CETEX at The Hague next week; it is problematical whether I will myself.

As a point of color, you might be interested in the immediate origin of my own concern. As a geneticist, I have of course been deeply interested in theoretical questions of the origin and distribution of life, and have followed the astronomical literature (and more distantly the astronautical anticipations) for some time. I spent the fall of 1957 (their spring) at Melbourne, Australia and saw Sputnik I down there almost immediately after its first sighting. My wife and I returned from Australia via India and landed at Calcutta the evening of November 7, 1957. This happened to be the occasion of a lunar eclipse, and hordes of people were in the ~~xxxxxx~~ streets, individually and in processions, many of them going for ritual immersions in the Ganges. The rest of the population was watching intently at the eclipsed moon fully expecting some manifestation of a Sputnik II landing there with some massive deposit of a marker dye or whatnot. The 'whatnot' has stuck in my own mind as a potential hazard of inestimable magnitude for ultimate biological exploration of the moon, and much more particularly of the nearer planets.

KINKEAD, E.

As you know, proposals for this kind of demonstration have been discussed in many circles: cf. Time, June 23, 1958 (p.44); Alsop's article in the Wash. Post for Feb. 21, 1958. Now that the first hysteria over Sputnik has partly abated, it seems doubtful that 'demonstrations' will take priority over serious scientific objectives. The immediate problem now is to devise tangible experiments that can give us information on the existence and character of living forms on other planets within the limitations of rocket probes.

I am not anticipating making any trips east during the next few months; however if Stanford (i.e. San Francisco) is in effect closer to you than Madison I would be happy to see you here. It is also possible that I can collect more background for your use after the Cetex meeting.

I am enclosing some material that has been published or already widely disseminated.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

CC: Hugh Odishaw